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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIJING 002839

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SUBJECT: GUIZHOU RIOT PROMPTS LEADERSHIP CONCERN, CONTACTS
SAY

REF: BEIJING 2592

Classified By: Political Minister Counselor Aubrey Carlson. Reasons 1.
4 (b/d).

Summary

1. (C) The large-scale June 28-29 riot in Weng'an County, Guizhou Province (reftel), constitutes a dangerous new type of social protest that has become more prominent in the past four years and has increasingly prompted top leadership concern, according to Embassy contacts. In addition to being large in scale and violent, such incidents involve many participants who have no direct relationship to the incident that sparked the protest but are simply expressing pent-up anger at long-endured abuse by local officials. PRC commentary on the event has acknowledged that festering hostility against local officials, commercial interests and organized crime over a long period of time and across a wide range of issues underlies the Weng'an violence and similar protests in other areas of China. End Summary.

A Different Kind of "Mass Incident"

2. (C) The Weng'an incident represents a new type of "mass incident" (China's term for protest activity that the leadership views as threatening to stability) that is increasingly worrisome to China's top leaders, according to Zhang Xiaojin, Associate Dean of Renmin University's School of International Studies. In a discussion with PolOff on July 2, Zhang said that aside from being violent and large in scale, the defining characteristic of such incidents is that many, or even most, of the participants have no direct connection to the precipitating event or grievances that sparked the violence. Such incidents appear to serve as a channel for the expression of deep, pent-up anger toward officialdom that may have little to do with the issue at hand, Zhang said. (Note: Per reftel and Chinese media, as many as 30,000 people rioted following allegations that a teenage girl found dead in a river had not committed suicide as claimed by local officials but had been raped and murdered by relatives of local officials. The rioters burned down or otherwise damaged local Party, Government and Public Security headquarters. Authorities insist the girl killed herself, but the Provincial Party Secretary subsequently apologized publicly for local officials' record of irresponsible behavior and sacked several of them.)

3. (C) Zhang said that just prior to the 28 June eruption of violence, a prominent specialist on social unrest, Yu Jianrong (protect) of the Chinese Academy of Social Science, delivered a paper at Renmin University on this new type of social protest. According to Zhang, Yu said that three similar incidents in Wanzhou, Sichuan (2005), in Chizhou, Anhui (in 2006), and in Zhejiang (2007) have raised particular concerns in the Central leadership. Zhang offered that a common method of resolving such incidents, by paying

off the key antagonists, will not work in a poor area like Guizhou, which does not have the kind of excess cash that a wealthy province like Guangdong has. Zhang said that Yu Jianrong revealed that Vice Premier (and Politburo member) Zhang Dejiang once said that such incidents can always be solved through buyoffs, the approach Zhang took while serving as Guangdong Party Secretary.

¶4. (C) Tsinghua University Professor Chu Shulong told PolOff July 11 that the Weng'an incident is similar in many respects to large-scale demonstrations in recent years but differs from them in having received a lot more publicity and having generated a healthy discussion of the implications. In Chu's view, the leadership's handling of the matter suggests that it is trying to shore up stability by going after the perpetrators of the riot but at the same time using the incident to emphasize its campaign for better leadership that is responsive to the public. Chu noted that the public, especially China's netizens, is getting tired of propaganda controls and increasing its demand for unfiltered information on such incidents. People tend to be highly suspicious of the Government's version of events, according to Chu, especially regarding how the young woman in this case died. In this vein, Chu said that the murder of six policemen in Shanghai on July 1 at the hands of a Beijing resident in apparent retaliation for being abused in custody last October has generated similar commentary. The Shanghai police do not want the real story to come out, but "everyone knows that they abused the guy," Chu said, adding that the Beijing resident's repeated efforts to pursue redress over the eight-month period between the alleged police abuse and his rampage lend credence to his claims of abuse.

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¶5. (C) Xu Shiquan, former journalist and now Secretary General of the Taiwan Studies Association, told PolOff July 15 that the Chinese leadership is worried about incidents like the Weng'an riots. He was impressed that Chinese media reported the incident so quickly and that the criticism of the local officials has been so open. He noted that the quality of local officials in many areas is "extremely low" and that many of them are out for themselves rather than to serve the public. He lamented that China does not have a "real civil service" where officials are properly trained and vetted for their positions.

PRC Media Commentary Acknowledges Pent-Up Anger

¶6. (SBU) PRC commentary on the Weng'an incident, especially in papers run by the Communist Youth League (CYL), has acknowledged that festering hostility against local officials, commercial interests and organized crime over a long period of time and across a wide range of issues underlay the Weng'an violence and similar violent protests in other areas of China. For example, China Youth Daily, the official CYL paper, ran a series of articles on the Weng'an incident from July 5-16 sharply critical of the long-time abuse of local residents by local officials, mine owners, developers and criminal gangs, and asking for a "balanced" appraisal of the local Public Security chief Shen Guirong. One article said that Shen, who was fired by the Provincial Party Secretary, was the victim of a system that required Public Security officers to become involved in conflicts that were the responsibility of Party officials, not the police.

¶7. (SBU) Web commentary was particularly harsh on the Government's effort to control the information on the Weng'an incident. One popular blog posted a series of photos during a Guizhou press conference on July 3 that showed a man conferring with Government officials on the dais and then apparently planting questions with reporters in the audience. The blogger jokingly asked "haven't they ever heard of text messages?" Another website called www.threepushups.com was launched to mock the official account of Weng'an teenager Li

Shufen's death. Media reported that Li's boyfriend did three push-ups on the bridge and then Li said, "I'm leaving" and jumped into the river. The website allows people to post pictures of themselves doing push-ups on bridges. One web-savvy twenty-something told PolOff that the push-up account was "absurd" and asked "Does the Government think we are all idiots?"

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